



Retrospective Pledge Voting and Political Accountability

The Costs of Broken Promises

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Theres Matthieß
University of Göttingen
Göttingen, Niedersachsen, Germany

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SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Must government parties fear electoral punishment for breaking their campaign pledges? This book examines “retrospective pledge voting” (RPV), that is whether and under which conditions citizens are less likely to vote for government parties that have performed worse in fulfilling their promises. The main theoretical argument is that “pledge performance”-government parties’ ability and/or willingness to fulfil election pledges-matters for voting for two reasons: citizens lose both projected policy benefits and trust in parties to be honest and competent political actors. In addition, it is hypothesised that the political context and citizens’ individual characteristics moderate the relation between pledge performance and voting. RPV is examined at three different levels of analysis: starting at the aggregate level based on observational data, proceeding with the group level based on survey data, and finally going down to the micro level based on experimental data. This threefold approach allows the volume to present a thorough understanding of RPV at all levels-including the moderating effects of numerous explanatory factors-while maximising internal and external validity. The results affirm RPV as a real phenomenon; citizens indeed penalise government parties for poor pledge performance. Surprisingly, there is no evidence that the political context moderates this association, indicating that RPV occurs consistently across different contexts. Crucially, more sceptical citizens with negative preexisting opinions are found to be stricter in punishing pledge breakage. These findings carry significant scientific and societal implications, contributing to a deeper understanding of democratic representation and voter-party linkages. This book:

- bridges previous research on election pledges, government performance, and voting;
- develops a new theoretical framework on retrospective pledge voting (RPV) and its institutional and individual-level determinants;
- presents an innovative empirical approach at different levels of analysis using observational, survey, and experimental data;
- sheds new light on the normative ideal of promissory representation;
- has implications for debates on the superiority of majoritarian or consensus democracies.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 introduces the empirical puzzle and the research questions of the book: do government parties that exhibit poor performance in keeping their election pledges have to fear electoral losses? Does “retrospective pledge voting” (RPV) exist? The first chapter provides a brief overview of the state of research on election pledges, government performance, and voting. It elucidates the book’s contribution: by bridging these different strands of research and creating a novel theoretical framework that delves into the dynamics of RPV and explores institutional and individual-level determinants. In addition, the book presents an innovative empirical approach that encompasses observational, survey, and experimental data across various levels of analysis. The chapter also highlights the normative relevance of this book by referring to the concepts of “promissory representation” and the “responsible electorate” and introducing the idea of an “accountability linkage”-how incongruence between policy offers and outputs (“input-output linkage”) affects retrospective voting decisions. The chapter then proceeds with a summary of the theoretical argument and the research design, concluding with a brief overview of the successive chapters.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 introduces the main theoretical concepts and provides theoretical arguments for why a government party’s election outcome is expected to depend on its “pledge performance”, that is its ability and/or willingness to fulfil election pledges. This theory of retrospective pledge voting (RPV) offers an integrative perspective between different models of voting: it combines a prospective-oriented approach emphasising the crucial role of preferential differences between parties for citizens’ vote

decisions and retrospective-oriented approaches focusing on the electoral sanctioning of government performance. First, the chapter presents how a government party's pledge performance and citizens' vote decisions are linked step by step, leading through a chain that starts with pledge-making, continues with prospective voting ("authorising election"), pledge performance, and ends with retrospective voting ("sanctioning election"). It also considers the perception of pledge performance as an important precondition when investigating RPV: even with a general negativity bias in perceptions, voters still perceive differences in parties' pledge performance. The chapter unfolds the main causal mechanisms for why pledge performance is expected to affect voting: if election pledges are not fulfilled, voters not only lose projected policy benefits but also lose trust in a party to be competent and assertive. Additionally, the chapter considers potential constraining factors of RPV, namely the political context (clarity of responsibility and power within coalitions) and citizens' individual characteristics (policy consistency and pre-existing opinion). The chapter concludes with the specification of hypotheses derived from the theoretical model that guide the empirical analysis.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 introduces a threefold methodological approach. It conceptualises and operationalises key concepts, with pledge performance as the main independent variable and retrospective voting as the main dependent variable. It outlines the innovative empirical investigation of RPV across three levels of analysis: aggregate (utilising observational data from 16 countries over time), group (using survey data from 6 countries over time), and micro (employing experimental data from 2 studies conducted in Germany—the first based on real-world pledges and the second on a hypothetical scenario). For each level of analysis, the chapter explains the hypotheses to be tested, with different levels allowing the examination of various moderating factors, such as clarity of responsibility at the aggregate level and party identification at the micro level. The chapter details the data collection process for each level and highlights the benefits of each study in terms of key scientific research criteria, for example the internal validity brought by the micro-level analysis based on the two experiments and the external validity inherent in the aggregate-level study based on observational data. This chapter underscores how the combined design of the book enables a balanced consideration of different criteria, providing a

comprehensive investigation of RPV at various levels. This approach offers a thorough understanding of the dynamics-and limits-involved in voting decisions based on pledge performance.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 marks the initiation of the multi-stage empirical investigation of retrospective pledge voting (RPV). Specifically, it addresses the first research sub-question: does a government party's overall pledge performance impact its electoral outcome? Aligned with the theory presented in Chap. 2, it tests the central hypothesis that poorer pledge performance results in inferior electoral outcomes. The chapter also explores the hypothesised moderating effects of the political context, that is clarity of responsibility at the institutional and government levels as well as power within coalitions. To test these hypotheses, observational data on pledge fulfilment from 16 different countries are harmonised and combined, supplemented by data on electoral outcomes, clarity of responsibility, and so on. The results indicate evidence for RPV at the aggregate level: parties with higher levels of broken pledges are more likely to face voter sanctions in the next election. However, in contrast to economic voting, there is no indication that RPV is moderated by clarity of responsibility; electoral punishments occur in different contexts. Notably, within coalitions, there is a distinction: while senior partners may gain votes when fulfilling more pledges, junior partners generally suffer and lose votes, irrespective of their pledge performance.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 represents the second study of the book's threefold empirical analysis. This chapter delves into the exploration of egocentric, group-specific retrospective pledge voting. It scrutinises the voting decisions of individuals within specific groups, investigating whether citizens belonging to a particular group penalise government parties for poor performance in delivering on promises made to that group. This approach enhances control over the perception of pledge performance, a crucial step in the retrospective pledge voting (RPV) chain. The group-level study tests the primary hypothesis, examining whether voters personally affected by specific pledges are less likely to support a party that made unfulfilled promises. Additionally, it explores the moderating effects of the political context (clarity of responsibility) and individual characteristics, including

past vote decisions and party identification. Utilising data from national election studies (CSES, BES, ANES) across 6 countries and 17 elections, the study merges this data with pledge fulfilment information for three key groups dependent on welfare expansions: parents, pensioners, and students. The results support the main hypothesis, revealing that citizens are more inclined to penalise a government party for unfulfilled pledges directly affecting them. Similar to Chap. 4, there is no evidence at the group level that clarity of responsibility moderates RPV. Regarding individual characteristics, there is evidence that policy consistency, indicated by past vote decisions, is influential, but contrary to expectations, there is no evidence that party identification constrains RPV.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 concludes the threefold empirical investigation, delving into the micro level based on two survey experiments conducted in Germany. It explores whether voters are less likely to support a government party when informed about the non-fulfilment of a single election pledge. Building on the main theory from Chap. 2, the main hypothesis posits that information about pledge non-fulfilment should decrease voters' propensity to support that party. Moderating hypotheses related to policy consistency (past vote and policy preferences) and pre-existing opinions (party identification and mistrust) are also tested. Experiment I, part of face-to-face interviews, depicts real-world scenarios of promise fulfilment and breaking by the German Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Experiment II, an online study, presents a hypothetical situation with a fictive party either reducing education spending (control group) or breaking an election pledge by spending less money (treatment). The results from the fictive experiment II strongly support the finding that information about a non-fulfilled election pledge diminishes support for a party; the real-world-based experiment I, though more tentative, aligns similarly. Concerning moderating factors, evidence suggests citizens' prior opinions influence their processing of information on pledge non-fulfilment, with a more negative view of a government party's overall performance leading to a more pronounced decrease in PTV. However, conclusive evidence is lacking on whether past vote decisions, party identification, or shared preferences moderate RPV at the micro level.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 provides a summary of the retrospective pledge voting (RPV) argument and the study's empirical findings. The threefold investigation reveals that, at the aggregate level, lower pledge fulfilment rates are associated with worse electoral outcomes based on observational data; at the group level, survey data indicate that citizens personally affected by broken pledges are less likely to vote for a party; and at the micro level, experimental data shows that informing citizens about pledge non-fulfilment decreases their likelihood of voting for a party. The chapter also outlines the lack of moderation by clarity of responsibility, party identification, and policy preferences on RPV. However, it highlights evidence that past vote decisions at the group and mistrust at the micro level moderate RPV, and at the aggregate level, evidence shows that senior coalition partners' electoral success depends more on pledge performance than junior partners. The chapter contextualises these results within previous research, emphasises the book's contribution to the literature on electoral pledges, prospective and retrospective voting, and suggests directions for future research.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 explores the broader implications of this book's findings for democracy and society. The evidence of retrospective pledge voting (RPV) supports the idea of an "accountability linkage" and a responsible electorate: voters care about issues, monitor government parties, and hold them accountable. This incentivises political parties to be honest and fulfil pledges, enhancing democratic functioning. The chapter also addresses two significant challenges shown by this study: RPV appears independent of institutional settings, prompting another debate on the superiority of majoritarian versus proportional systems. Additionally, there is a risk of easy manipulation, particularly by populist parties, as sceptical voters are more susceptible to information on non-fulfilment of an individual pledge. Last, the chapter emphasises the societal duty to be responsible and transparent, particularly for media, which has demonstrated a strong negative bias in the past.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANES	American National Election Studies
BES	British Election Study
CDU	Christlich Demokratisch Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany)
CPPP	Comparative Party Pledges Project
CSES	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems
CSU	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (Christian Social Union of Bavaria)
EMI	Economic Misery Index
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei (Free Democratic Party)
ODS	Union of Democratic Forces
PP	Pledge performance
PS	Partido Socialista
PSOE	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party
PTV	Propensity to vote
RPV	Retrospective Pledge Voting
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
WZB	Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung

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PART I

A Theoretical Framework for
Understanding RPV



Election Pledges, Democratic Representation, and Voting

The anticipation of future prospective voting should encourage candidates in election campaigns to make commitments that will appeal to many voters. The threat of retrospective sanctions against those who betray their commitments should encourage incumbents to keep those promises.

—(Powell 2000, p. 9)

“More net from the gross!”—this was one of the most important promises that the German liberal party **FDP** made before the parliamentary election in 2009. Many voters were convinced and put their hope in the **FDP**. The liberal party had a significant electoral success, a vote share of nearly 15 per cent with a vote gain of 5 per cent and entered coalition with the Christian Democrats. Right after the coalition negotiations, the party leader Guido Westerwelle announced: “Promised, kept!” But no! This announcement was far too optimistic and too hasty. The election four years later was certainly not the day of rewarding, but the day of reckoning. The **FDP** lost 10 per cent of votes, and even failed to enter parliament, because they did not meet the necessary threshold of 5 per cent. What happened? There was no general tax reduction as had been promised, and the **FDP** failed to fulfil more than 50 per cent of all its election pledges during its time in coalition. Another example showing a similar pattern is the Italian centre-

right party The People of Freedom, led by Silvio Berlusconi, that broke over 60 percent 2008–2012 and lost 16 per cent of its votes. Is there a general pattern beyond these particular cases? *Do government parties that show a poor performance in keeping their election pledges have to fear electoral losses? Does “retrospective pledge voting” (RPV) exist?*

Election pledges are a key topic in democracies, as well as in both public and scientific debates. They constitute an integral part of the representative relationship between political parties and citizens. There is kind of a “natural expectation” that electoral promises are meant to be kept. Especially before elections, the public and media show a high interest in parties’ election pledges and their performance in fulfilling or breaking their promises. The before mentioned broken promises of the FDP received high public attention with headlines such as “FDP: Promised, broken!” (Das Erste 2011) or “Taxes Simpler? Lower? Fairer? There is hardly anything left of it” (Die Welt 2011). Another example, from the UK, is the media coverage of the Conservatives’ broken promises during their time in government between 2010 and 2015, for example, “We have absolutely no plans to raise VAT.” *The Mirror* headlined, “General Election 2015: 50 promises the Conservatives have broken since they came to power. From balancing the books, to reducing immigration and from improving living standards to protecting the poor here are the broken promises that litter their 5 year term” (Jack Blanchard 2015). Furthermore, we see that public attention to this issue is increasing: there are various “pledge trackers” that provide timely information on the actual breaking or fulfilment of election pledges by the parties, for example, in Canada, Germany and the USA.¹

Scientific debates have also shown a growing interest in what I call “pledge performance”, that is, government parties’ ability and/or willingness to fulfil election pledges. The Comparative Party Pledges Project (CPPP) has analysed the fulfilment of election pledges across different countries and over time. They have shown that the share of pledge fulfilment varies from 23 per cent to over 90 per cent. Thus, sometimes government parties show better, other times poorer performance in fulfilling their pledges. Election pledges are “commitments in parties’ programmes to carry out certain policies or achieve certain goals” (Thom-

¹ Canada: <https://www.polimeter.org/en/trudeau>, USA: <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/>, Germany: <https://fragenstaat.de/koalitionstracker/>.

son et al. 2017, p. 528). The variance in parties' pledge performance is the starting point of this book, but it goes one step further by looking at citizens' reactions in terms of "retrospective pledge voting" (RPV). Is this variation in government parties' pledge performance reflected by citizens when they make their vote decisions?

The next section lays the normative foundations of this book and introduces the main theoretical concepts: What are electoral promises and why should we care about them? Is there a democratic duty to keep electoral promises? And what does it mean for democratic functioning if citizens reward government parties that fulfil their promises and punish them when they break their pledges?² The second section of the introductory chapter situates this book in the literature and outlines the scientific contribution. The third section provides an outline of the book, introduces the specific research questions and summarises the main findings.

1.1 THE DEMOCRATIC NEED OF A "RESPONSIBLE ELECTORATE"

1.1.1 *Substantive Representation by Parties and the Chain of Democratic Linkage*

Representation has been a necessary condition to make democracy as a form of state possible in large, modern societies (Dahl 1982, p. 13; Schmitter and Karl 1991; Urbinati 2000). Democracy is government by the people, and representative democracy is government by the people through representation (Urbinati and Warren 2008). Representation ensures that the "demos" is the origin of power for making decisions, even if not all people are able to be involved in all the stages of decision-making processes at all times. Thus, decision making in representative democratic states is organised by a division of labour: a group of people

² The word "punish" is used synonymously with "not voting for a government party" (because a citizen either votes for another party or abstains). In reverse, "reward" means that a citizen votes (again) for a government party. This is also how economic voting scholars used these terms (Powell and Whitten 1993; Fiorina 1981; Hobolt et al. 2013; Key 1966). Additionally, the expression "pledge breakage" and "pledge non-fulfilment" are used identically in this study. It means that parties do not fulfil their pledges—either they actively do the opposite of what they promised, or they do nothing so that the status quo remains, or something else happens that hinders that party to fulfil its pledges.

(the representatives) who are legitimated electorally by the citizens (the represented) are responsible for establishing rules in order to organise the living in society. This division of labour inevitably establishes a relation and a line of conflict between those who rule and those who do not.

Elections are a key instrument for creating a relationship between the representatives and the represented (Powell 2000). With the act of voting, people delegate power to policy makers and authorise them to rule, and finally, when the next election is coming, individuals have the ability to hold policymakers responsible for their performance, either by re-electing them as a reward for good performance or by withdrawing their electoral support as a form of punishment for poor performance (Fiorina 1981; Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 2003, p.516). Thus, elections constitute a cyclic element of representative democracy: this is where representation formally starts—and might end.³

This book focusses on political parties, and more precisely on **government parties**, as main policy makers and representatives. Political parties are central actors in modern, representative democracies (Dalton et al. 2011, p. 4; Converse and Pierce 1986, pp. 664–673). I assume parties to be collective, homogeneous actors. Scholars, such as Weßels (1991, p. 333) and Esaiasson (1999), have argued and shown that parties are better in representing citizens' interests than individual representatives. Parties are collective actors and organisational bodies that are expected to bundle single issues into coherent political ideologies and policy programmes (Downs 1957b, p. 141). They claim to organise and shape the living in a democratic society, identify occurring problems and challenges and propose solutions to address them. In particular, I am interested in government (and not opposition) parties, because they are the main drivers of legislation and usually control the agenda.

Figure 1.1 shows that delegation from voters to governments with political decision-making power is a chain that includes different steps and links. The chain of accountability—that is of main interest for retrospective pledge voting—goes in the reverse direction from the government to voters via parties. The “chain of delegation consists of a series of agency relationships” (Strøm 2003, p. 64). For example, a party in parliament is an agent of the voters, but also a principal of the government. Citizens

³ Of course, elections are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for democracy, see, for example, Alonso et al. (2011, p. 6).

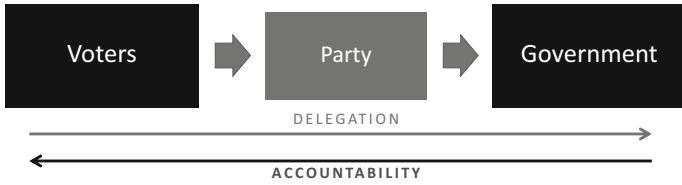


Fig. 1.1 Delegation and accountability

Note: The figure is a simplified version of the “single-chain delegation model of a parliamentary system”, as suggested by Strøm (2003, p. 65). The black arrow and boxes indicate that this study examines the chain of accountability from government parties to voters

delegate power to parties by voting for them. Those parties that enter parliament then form a government. This (usually) requires a vote by majority in parliament. In two-party systems, the party with a parliamentary majority enters government alone, while parties in multi-party systems usually form coalitions. Of course, delegation and accountability processes are more complex in multi-party systems. However, as will be argued below, following a mandate model of democracy means that also coalition parties have a normative duty of being responsible and reliable actors that try to stick to their election pledges.⁴

This book builds on the concept of **substantive representation** that describes the core idea of democratic representation: the necessity to represent the substantial interests of voters and to ensure that political decisions are in line with the people’s will. Pitkin refers to substantive representation as “acting for”: representatives should behave and take actions on behalf of the represented (Pitkin 1967, p. 516).⁵ Substantive representation and the relation between voters and parties can again be seen as a multi-stage process (Weßels 1993, 102f; Lehmann 2019) or as a “chain of democratic linkage”, as Dalton et al. (2011) call it, based on the

⁴ Nevertheless, my theoretical arguments and the analyses take different institutional and government settings into account. Not only parties in coalitions might have more difficulties in fulfilling their pledges, but it is also plausible that voters have more difficulties in holding coalition parties accountable when compared to single-party governments. This is also expected when there are additional veto players, such as presidents or second chambers.

⁵ Beyond substantive representation, there are other forms: formalistic, symbolic and descriptive (Pitkin 1967), see also Mansbridge (2003); Birch (1993).